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The Comics Go to War

On April 19, 2004, Garry Trudeau infused the typically bland fare of the daily comics page with some gritty realism: in that day's installment of *Doonesbury*, a long-running character in the strip—B.D.—receives a serious wound to the leg while deployed in Iraq (figure 1). Echoing the trauma and disorientation of combat, he is depicted falling in and out of consciousness, and it is only after several daily episodes that the gravity of his wound becomes clear. In subsequent installments, B.D.'s harrowing experience continues; he goes from lying on the battlefield with one leg shattered, to being reunited with his family, and then engaging in a long rehabilitation process that includes wrestling with the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (figure 2). Because Trudeau treated this episode with such nuance and unflinching honesty, many readers of the strip reported feeling a great deal of vicarious psychological empathy and trauma; for example, fans wrote into the *Doonesbury* website, saying that they were “breathless,” “crying,” and feeling “like it happened to a friend” (Montgomery).



Figure 1: “Hey!” DOONESBURY © (19 April 2004) G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.

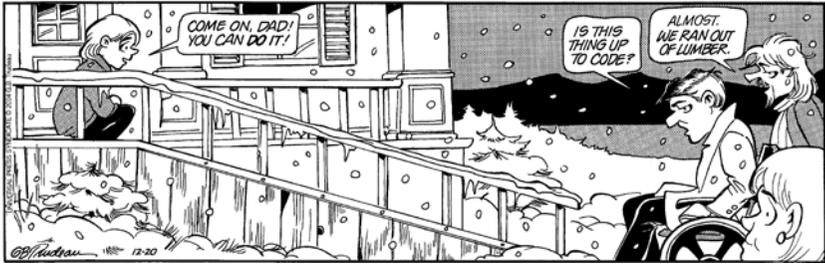


Figure 2: "Come on, Dad!" DOONESBURY © (20 December 2004) G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.

A majority of cultural critics cited the work for its originality and boldness in exploring the various facets of a wounded soldier's experience with humor and nuance; and groups for injured vets added their praise, with one spokesperson saying that the strip gave "millions of Americans . . . a gut level appreciation of the impact of posttraumatic stress disorder on soldiers and their families" (Montgomery). Military organizations also offered praise—often in the form of awards such as the Commander's Award for Public Service by the Department of Army, and the Distinguished Public Service Award from the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.¹

A vocal minority of comics readers and pundits, nevertheless—such as the talk show host Bill O'Reilly—were derisive in their evaluation of Trudeau's work, charging that he was merely "attempting to sap the morale of Americans" in the midst of a critical war (Weingarten). And while Trudeau was effectively dealing with the issues of combat and its social and personal traumas in the B.D. series, he was also skewering the larger diplomatic aspects of war in ways that some critics perceived as overly partisan or journalistically compromised because he awkwardly melded the discourses of satire and investigative reporting.

Observing the funnies page from a distance, it might be difficult to comprehend how one of the most vital (and, to some, controversial) depictions of the human costs of combat could emerge in a medium—comic strips—which has been so thoroughly associated over the years with inconsequential gags and reductive art. A closer familiarity with Trudeau's methods and strategies, however—as he has expanded the artistic methods and social functions of his medium, provocatively melded the roles of different comedic mediums, and capitalized on the inherent strengths and broad social reach of a popular art form—helps to explain this qualified success. This study provides the following frames for understanding

¹ Other commendations included the Commander's Award from Disabled American Veterans, the President's Award for Excellence in the Arts from Vietnam Veterans of America, and a special citation from the Vet Centers.

Trudeau's complex contribution to this literature and art of combat: a discussion of *Doonesbury's* place in the history of how comics mediums have depicted war on both macro and micro levels; a description of the varied tools of satire and comedy Trudeau uses to deal with the different facets of war; and an analysis of how Trudeau has borrowed from other discourses and art forms to deepen and expand his strip's ability to address the complexities of combat and its costs.

In order to properly frame and appreciate Trudeau's qualified success in using a popular comic medium to deal so complexly with a ground-level soldier's experience with warfare, one can first take a historical view of how cartoonists in comic strips and related mediums have traditionally dealt with similar subject matter. We can begin by observing that the comic medium with the longest tradition of engaging with images of war is political cartooning. Both the format and functions of editorial cartoons have shaped—and in many cases, limited—what they can say about war and a soldier's experience in combat. The single panel frame, for example, encourages cartoonists to create iconic images in which human figures or inanimate objects stand in as broad symbols or metaphors. Lone soldiers, in particular, often serve as iconic everyman warriors, representing the entire military, or standing in as a symbol of an abstract governmental policy or position in a debate. A powerful ideological point may be made through a reductive editorial cartoon, but it often does little to help readers to empathize with soldiers as specific individuals having a complex identity or history.

The political cartooning convention of simplifying people and ideas into iconic symbols also results at times in jingoistic imagery that vilifies enemies, reducing an entire nation or ethnic group to stereotypes of inferiority or evil. A famous example is the image of a Spanish brute printed by *Life* magazine at the start of the Spanish American War. With some historical distance, this caricature seems shrill and ridiculously exaggerated, but at the time it was considered a compelling piece of propaganda that resonated with a populace swept up in the fever of war. The impetus behind such an image is often a national crisis in which a political cartoonist is compelled by free-floating political and social pressure (and sometimes direct editorial pressure) to resort to extreme distortions. In these moments cartoonists tend toward propagandistic overstatement, belying the constructedness and inherent exaggerations of the stereotype by anxiously asserting and repeating those assertions in "excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed" (Bhabha 66).

Other vivid examples of these reductive and jingoistic caricatures can be found in the cartoon propaganda that was produced on both sides of the conflict during

the first and second world wars. Political cartoons from the German magazine *Lustige Blätter*, for example, distorted and denigrated Jews, Russian communists and black American soldiers to varying degrees. And then, of course, British, Russian, and American cartoonists executed similar treatments of German and Japanese stereotypes. The pressure on editorial cartoonists to serve essentially as propagandists and cheerleaders during times of war has diminished in the last half century with the proliferation and fragmentation of media voices, but the inherent limitations of the medium—its one-shot distillations of a political “truth”—have largely prevented any cartoonist from creating a body of work that deals with combat with any degree of nuance or complexity.

One notable exception to this rule that deserves mention, nevertheless—because of its resemblance to Trudeau’s recent work—is the work of Bill Mauldin, an editorial cartoonist who documented the day to day, foxhole-level struggles of GIs during World War II. While Mauldin did create traditional political cartoons, his most nuanced work can more accurately be described as single frame gag cartoons. These images—like editorial cartoons—have only a single panel in which to make their point, and thus one might expect Mauldin’s cartoons to rely on easy stereotypes and simplistic jokes. He transcended the seemingly inherent limitations of his medium, however, through three strategies: first, by turning the focus away from the enemy and poking fun a variety of other deserving targets: military bureaucracies and hierarchies, the mundane but extreme challenges of army life during warfare, and the universal foibles of men who are separated from their normal lives. Second, he based his gags on direct observation. He lived with the GIs, experiencing their hardships and inconveniences, and exposing himself to the jargon and profanity peculiar to their everyday grind. His cartoons, as a result, featured jokes that were grounded by specificity; and they contained humor that was appropriately dark and cynical, given the chronic discomforts and indignities these men had to endure on the warfront. Finally, he individualized his iconic soldiers, giving them vivid personalities and names—Willie and Joe, most famously. Mauldin explained that

I don’t make the infantryman look noble, because he couldn’t look noble even if he tried. Still there is a certain nobility and dignity in combat soldiers and medical aid men with dirt in their ears. They are rough and their language gets coarse because they live a life stripped of convention and niceties. Their nobility and dignity come from the way they live unselfishly and risk their lives to help each other. (Mauldin 8)

The sum result is a series of gag cartoons that defy the strictures of their medium, amounting to an ongoing narrative that has nuance, sympathy and authentically-grounded humor. In recognition of this unusually impressive body of cartoons he created during World War II, Mauldin won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning in 1945 at the astonishing age of 23.

The comic book is a cartoon medium that is inherently more expansive than editorial and gag cartoons; the continuity of storytelling, across multiple panels and from book to book allows for a level of nuance and character development that is potentially novelistic. The medium would thus seem to be a more promising venue for featuring visually and comedically complex depictions of combat. However, the narrow genre conventions of the medium during its pre-1950s golden age—which included formulaic story patterns and archetypal constructions of good and evil characters—conspired against most artists and writers going beyond war stories that were jingoistic tales featuring demonized enemies. During World War II this translated into images of rah rah American righteousness such as this image of Captain American dealing with the fanged Asian menace.

Much of that reductive treatment can be attributed to the historical period in which these comics were produced—an era that a univocal media depicted as one of unquestioning nationalism and noble conflicts. Some notable exceptions to the two dimensional approach of comic books emerged during the Korean War, however—in part because this conflict generated more ambivalence among Americans than did World War II. In the early 1950s, for example, EC comics published a comic book series titled “Two-Fisted Tales” that explored the traumas and complexities of war. The principle artist of the book, Harvey Kurtzman, eschewed stereotypes, depicted gritty scenes of violence and deprivation, and gave the figures in his comics a manic dynamism that amplified some of the anxieties one might feel in the midst of combat. There was an adult complexity to these comic books, in other words, that was unusual for the medium. Unfortunately the publisher, EC comics, was broken up in the late 1950s when the company was targeted in the Senate hearings on the alleged connections between juvenile delinquency and comic books. The rigidity of the comics code that came out of those hearings conspired against any comic book creators being able to again match, in the next two decades, the dark tone and vivid content of the *Two Fisted Tales*. Kurtzman’s career survived, nevertheless; he became one of the principle contributors to EC’s next creation—*MAD* magazine, a collection of rambunctious cartoon parodies and satires that evaded the code by marketing itself as a magazine rather than comic book.

Other comic book publishers featured war stories in the 1950s and 1960s, though none of them achieved the vivid complexity of the EC's *Two-Fisted Tales*. Some less established publishers such as Charlton Comics and Warren Publishing featured relatively sober and unexaggerated treatments of warfare, while DC and Marvel found ways to elevate individual soldiers to superhero status. Sgt. Rock (DC), for example, was unerringly accurate in his use of grenades and machine guns, often taking down enemy planes with one shot, and he was apparently indestructible, surviving multiple gunshot wounds, shrapnel injuries, and exposure to extreme cold. Marvel's contribution—Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos—were Army Rangers that rubbed shoulders with Captain America, achieving outrageous victories and continually defying death.

Returning to the medium of comic strips, in 1950 *Beetle Bailey* emerged—a popular strip that resembled Mauldin's Willie and Joe cartoons in several superficial ways. Created by the artist Mort Walker, it poked fun at the mundane and onerous aspects of being a ground level soldier; it starred a private, Beetle, whose only aspiration was to find moments of quiet leisure and avoid the wrath of army bureaucrats. The strip lacked Mauldin's naturalistic grittiness, however, and because it was set in a time of perpetual peace, it never had that undercurrent of pathos that gave weight to Mauldin's work. Aesthetically too, it was a sanitized view of military life that reveled in bright colors, rubbery and simplified cartoon figures, and violent but inconsequential slapstick gags.



Figure 3: "Oops," BEETLE BAILEY © (1970) Mort Walker. Reprinted with permission of KING FEATURES SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.

Other than a trivialization of real violence, Walker's playful treatment of a soldier's life seems fairly benign from a distance. In one respect, nevertheless—it's treatment of gender issues—it took on some disturbing layers. Like many midcentury male cartoonists, Walker fell into the knee jerk practice of dividing women into two stereotypical categories: the brow-beating, battle-axe of a wife, and the young, blonde, air-headed object of desire. Many of the strips' gags were based on General Halfrack's efforts to ogle and pursue his secretary, Miss Buxley, a young woman improbably wearing miniskirts and tube tops in a military setting. This panting objectification of women seemed to extend beyond the strip itself; Walker often drew Miss Buxley in the nude for the titillation of his fellow cartoonists in the National Cartoonists Society. For example, there are a number of internal publications of the NCS in the 1960s and 1970s that feature these nude drawings, including one that invites the reader to cut and paste the different parts of Miss Buxley's anatomy, a disturbing parody of a child's cut out doll.

Walker's dim treatment of women spilled beyond the comics page as well. He infamously concluded that "women have no sense of humor" since he could find no prominent female cartoonists working on the funnies page in the mid-1970s (Robbins 24-26). As you can imagine, the response from female cartoonists that had struggled away in a male-dominated and often sexist field for decades was fairly sharp. About ten years later, when he was president of the National Cartoonists Society, he made an effort to repair some of that earlier damage by designating 1985 the "Year of the Female Cartoonist." This "salute" was highlighted prominently in the programs and annuals of that year's meeting, but Walker and his buddy, Johnny Hart, the creator of *B.C.*, unfortunately also chose that year to include in the same publications drawings of their characters, Miss Buxley, and "Fat Broad," respectively, in the nude once again. In one of those images Miss Buxley's body, reclined in a pin-up style pose, becomes a landscape over which soldiers crawl.

Trudeau, fittingly, comes into the picture here. As a fully engaged, but sometimes aloof critic of that National Cartoonists Society in his early career, he described the actions of Walker and Hart as "a travesty of condescension and sexism," and "deeply offensive" (Controversy Over Sexism 49). He even resigned from the organization for a time because of these practices, saying that he could "no longer remain a member of an organization which consistently condones this kind of puerile, patronizing attitude towards 'gals.' While publishing naked cartoon characters may be the Society's idea of a 'salute' to women, it certainly isn't mine" (Ibid., 50).

Walker's level of female objectification is reprehensible enough in any cultural moment or context, but it takes on added layers of disturbing meaning when

featured within a comedy about military experiences and life. It points to more serious expressions of sexism within military culture such as the Tailhook Scandal in 1991—a convention in Las Vegas where a large number of soldiers, many of them married men, behaved as if the pressures and privileges of a military career exempted them from treating women in respectful or even humane ways. That penchant for military culture to sometimes create its own codes of compromised morality within insulated environments or during times of war—is satirized in devastating ways by Joseph Heller in *Catch-22*. The same winking sexism and objectification of women that one sees in *Beetle Bailey* is on display in Heller’s novel as well, but in *Catch-22*’s case it is depicted as a disturbing byproduct of a war-time military culture that creates its own code of warped morality.

Returning to Trudeau, one can now see that the likelihood of a comic strip creator ever using the medium to showcase complex treatments of military life and combat was fairly minimal. Trudeau, however, never conformed to the rules and expectations of what comic strips should look like and the cultural work they should perform. He fell into his career accidentally after having his college strip, *Bull Tales*, picked up by Universal Press Syndicate while he was still a student at Yale. The aesthetics of the strip were awkward initially—it was drawn with a loose, amateurish hand—and Trudeau often resorted to punch lines that contained easy stereotypes and clichés about college life. He was more sincerely tapped into the countercultural spirit of his times, nevertheless, than were any of his cartooning peers, and he broke the rules of the medium by including sharp social and political satire with a left-leaning slant from the beginning. He was also an astute observer of human behavior and created characters that transcended existing stereotypes or conventional comedic character types in their quirky particularities, conflicted inner lives, and sympathetic back stories. In addition to the topical satire, it was this construction of endearingly flawed characters that aged and changed over time, alongside readers, that won Trudeau so many fans and accolades in the long career that followed.

It is interesting to follow B.D. (the soldier who loses his leg in Trudeau’s 2004 strips) from his college days into his mature adulthood as a wounded soldier. He and his girlfriend, Boopsie, started out in the early days of *Bull Tales* (figure 4) and *Doonesbury* as laughable secondary characters, representing two dimensional social types: B.D. was the athletic star who womanized and carried a sense of macho entitlement everywhere he went. He was a bit of an idiot and bigoted lout, in addition, and the target audiences of Trudeau’s strip probably saw him as a representation of all things squarely, wrongly, middle-American. Boopsie was his stereotypical counterpart—a politically and socially naïve blonde who relied solely on her physical charms to get by in the world. She was a parody, in other

words, of the character type Mort Walker celebrated in Miss Buxley. It seemed appropriate that B.D. and Boopsie should become a couple, and in the early days of their relationship B.D. coasted on the glories of his college football career (a helmet always fused to his head as symbol of how central those exploits were to his core identity), while Boopsie tried to make it as a B-list movie actress (Figure 5). They represented the vulgar side of American culture: rampant commercialism, superficiality, selfishness, exaggerated gender roles, etc.

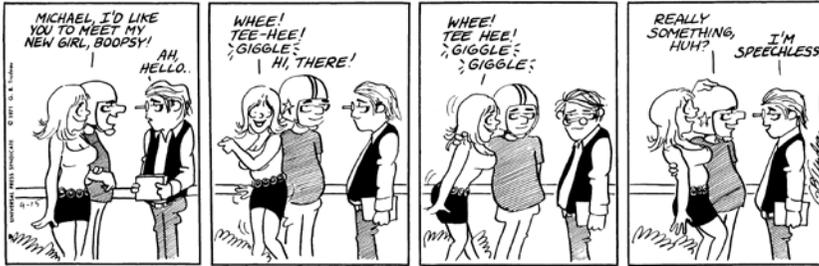


Figure 4: "My New Girlfriend," DOONESBURY © (1971) G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.



Figure 5: "Malibu Mudslide Victims..." DOONESBURY © (1980) G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.

But as with any character that develops over the course of a long, novelistic narrative, B.D. and Boopsie gradually became more complex and sympathetic. The first truly humanizing plot twist for B.D. occurred while he was still in college: in order to get out of writing a term paper, he enlisted in the army and was sent to fight in Viet Nam. There on the frontlines, some of his narrow-mindedness was challenged and he even befriended a soldier from the Viet Cong—Phred. While B.D.'s core weaknesses remained the same after returning from war, readers perhaps gave him some credit for having more depth and world-wisdom after experiencing some real life trauma and seeing the world from another cultural perspective.

Trudeau's treatment of B.D.'s friend and enemy here—Phred—is also significant. Unlike the demonized foes of early twentieth century political cartoons, Phred was a funny and complex character. At the same time, Trudeau could have erred in another direction, making him seem two-dimensionally noble (as if atoning for all of the previous Asian stereotypes in the medium); but instead, Phred is both a rabid fan of American rock and roll, and a devout, albeit loopy and unconventional, adherent to Communist dogma. The fact that the American public was highly ambivalent about the Viet Nam war helped create a window in which Trudeau could feature this complexity; but Trudeau also deserves credit for going beyond the blindered comedy of *Beetle Bailey*, which was also thriving on the comics page at this same time. Trudeau's choice to depict the collapse of Saigon through Phred's sympathetic eyes, for example, as he empathizes with his defeated enemy, B.D., suggests the level of nuance Trudeau had achieved at this early point in his career (figure 6).

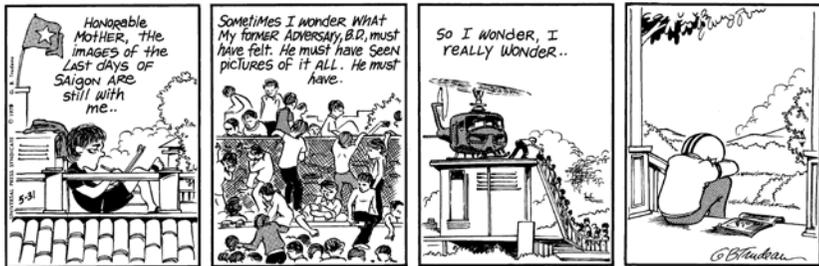


Figure 6: DOONESBURY © (31 May 1975) G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.

After his stint in Viet Nam, B.D. seemed to suffer for many years from a low-grade case of post-traumatic stress disorder. Less naïve and cheerful than he had been in college, he struggled with keeping a steady job for a time, watching a lot of television and living vicariously through Boopsie's Hollywood adventures. Later, he tried his hand at a number of careers including highway motorcycle cop and publicist for his wife—always trying to recapture some of the glory of his college days or excise some of the demons that haunted him from his time as a soldier. He eventually became a father and found an appropriate career as a high school football coach, leading his team, the Nike “Swooshes,” through some up and down seasons.

By the 1990s, B.D. had developed a middle-aged gravitas that further deepened his character. The culmination of this movement towards sympathetic depth

occurred during B.D.'s deployment as an Army reservist abroad—first in the Gulf War, and then later in Iraq. Trudeau supported the country's involvement in the first conflict, but was strongly opposed to the second. This created a dilemma for him: how to show support for the troops in his strips while also voicing his objections to the war. The solution was to deal with the conflict on several fronts, and with different characters.

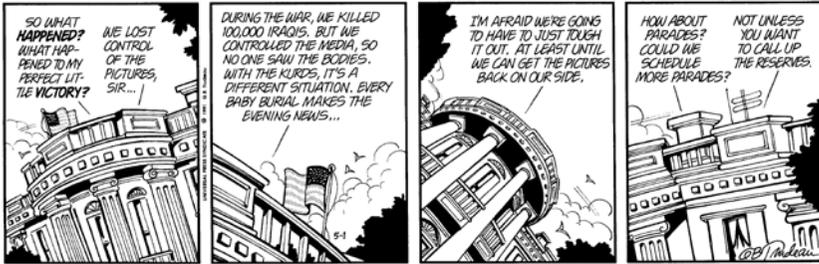


Figure 7: "Perfect Little Victory," DOONESBURY © (1991) G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.

First, Trudeau registered his view that the country was rushed toward war on the strengths of illegitimate justifications through a series of "talking white house strips" in which he explores the machinations going on behind the scenes in the oval office (figure 7). Those strips were supplemented by more visually arresting images of George W. Bush depicted as an asterisk inside of a battered Roman emperor's helmet, suggesting both the contested nature of his election, as well as his view of Bush's unilateral and supremely confident approach to the war on terrorism (figure 8). There was a long history of Trudeau feuding with the Bush clan, by the way, with the elder Bush saying that Trudeau spoke for "a bunch of Brie-tasting, Chardonnay-sipping elitists." Trudeau responded with the charge that the Yale-educated Bush clan was all "noblesse," with "no oblige." Two of the strangest episodes in that feud included Jeb Bush threatening to "kick Trudeau's [let's say "rear end"] all over New York," and Barbara Bush providing a little too much information, in complaining that "I feel like I need to take a bath after reading *Doonesbury*" and "I don't think most people understand [the strip]... Do I get mad? Sort of. But not really. I go swim a mile and move on" (Trudeau, *Flashbacks* 249).

There is a long tradition of other satirists using this device of reducing a political figure to an iconic symbol—Daumier rendering King Louis Phillippe as an obese pear, for example, or Thomas Nast drawing Boss Tweed as a bag of money; but no artist has taken the convention as far as Trudeau, creating a comic world in

A second aspect of the war—the government’s embroilment with defense companies such as Haliburton and private security firms such as Blackwater—was satirized in strips that featured Trudeau’s least sympathetic character Duke, and his Chinese assistant, Honey. Duke is based roughly on the gonzo-journalist, Hunter S. Thompson, but over the course of many illegitimate careers and exploits, he came to represent a great range of corrupt political and corporate figures. Trudeau has suggested that “because he [Duke] started life as a parody, he is the least complicated of all the characters. He suffers no ambiguity. He’s very binary: [he thinks] This is either good for me, or it’s not good for me. In that sense, he’s the shallowest character in the strip” (Bates 62). On a basic level, Duke simply represents human nature in its most selfish, id-like state: he is unaffected by ethical considerations, the needs of others, or abstract notions of community, fairness, or loyalty. But he is also smart and educated, and thus he is not an uncivilized monster; instead, he is a sophisticated opportunist who uses reason, the bureaucracy of the military-industrial complex, and the gullibility of others to create devious scams and engage in “civilized” forms of evil. The fact that he appears so blandly normal with his balding head, functional glasses, and unimposing figure, underscores this point; he is the classic little man or corporate drone who has discovered that physical strength and outrageous charisma are not necessary to make it to the top levels of government or corporate America. Instead, like the fellow war profiteer, Milo Minderbinder, in *Catch-22*, all Duke needs is the mercenary knowledge of how to work systems through cronyism, bribery, legal loopholes, and sheer, selfish chutzpah (figure 9).

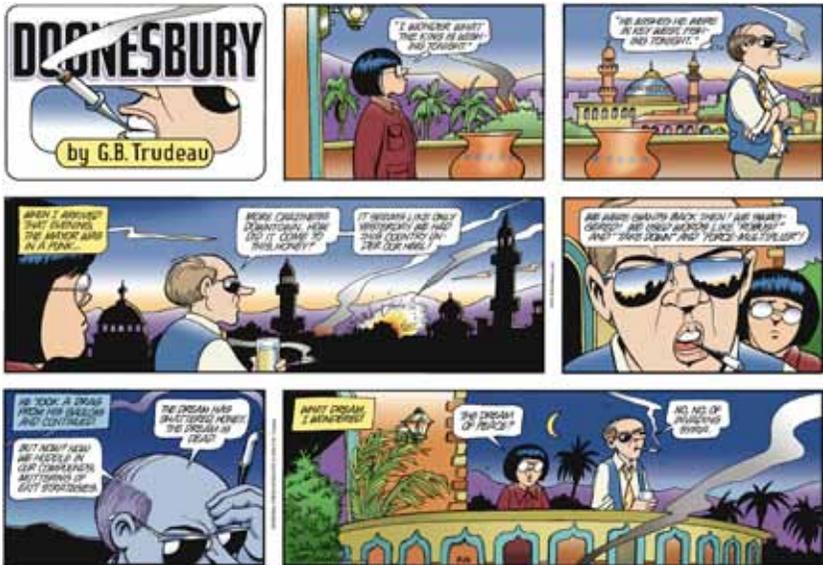


Figure 9: "When I arrived..." DOONESBURY © (2004) G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.

Finally, Trudeau was able to explore a third aspect of war through his gritty and honest treatment of B.D.'s battlefield injury and the subsequent process of recovery. A small detail in these opening combat strips that signaled Trudeau's more serious intentions—as well as B.D.'s maturation into a fully formed, novelistic character—was the removal of B.D.'s helmet at the moment of impact—and then the choice to leave it off during the recovery process. This may seem like an inconsequential and logical choice, since any recovering soldier would not wear a helmet, but this is an artificial, comic world in which B.D. always wears his helmet—whether it be football, law enforcement, or military—in hot tubs, at the kitchen table, or in bed. So Trudeau's removal of this character-defining gear effectively signaled a minor but significant shift away from constructed comedy into poignant naturalism.

Trudeau explains that "The thing that was most startling to readers was not just the revelation that [B.D.] had lost his limb but that he had lost his helmet. That was a very ad hoc decision I made as I was drawing the panel. I thought: Not only is it logical for him to lose it, but it underscores just how important and transitional this moment is in his life. Nothing will ever be the same for him." Readers, according to many reports, were "astonished" by this choice; its impact was especially powerful because it signified B.D.'s vulnerability in a vivid, literal

way; as one reader explained, it made the “loss of a leg all the more difficult for them to accept” (Bates 62).

Despite the poignant qualities of that particular decision, Trudeau actually began this entire run of strips, surprisingly, with no clear plans in mind. He recalled that “I had no idea where I was going with this storyline. I got about three days into it, and I heard from the Pentagon, and they said, well, it looks like you’re in for a long run with this. Given the nature of his injuries, how can we help? And so I just came down to Washington and started going to Walter Reed and started building the story from that” (Norris). The fact that Trudeau was able to speak directly with recovering soldiers, to view first hand their complex challenges, allowed him to infuse the recovery sequences in the strip with a high degree of empathy and realism.

Trudeau described his effort to make things up on the fly, while basing his comics on direct observation, as a “rolling experiment in naturalism.” He elaborated on how his direct engagement with wounded soldiers not only changed his strip, but his own methods of talking to individuals: “When I talk to wounded veterans, I usually don’t ask them what they think the mission was. I don’t presume, because their lives are wrenching enough without the suggestion that their sacrifices may have been without meaning. Moreover, if that is so, it will become apparent to them soon enough.... The young men and women who we’ve repeatedly put in harm’s way are paying the price for this misbegotten mission, and as long as it continues, I, like so many of our countrymen, must walk this strange line between hating the war but honoring the warrior. I don’t know how long we can keep it up....” (Weingarten).

Within the strip, this combination of amplified indignation and deeper empathy translated into a series of strips that charted B.D.’s recovery in a months-long story arc, dealing with such dark subjects as depression, chemical abuse, alienation from family, diminished job prospects, the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, etc (figure 10). From a distance this sounds like unpromising material for a comic strip—subject matter that would drive traditional readers away—but Trudeau infused the strips with his trademark irony, and a bracingly black humor that recovering soldiers report is an accurate reflection of the attitude that many of them adopt in order to cope psychologically with their trauma. Trudeau observed this coping mechanism during his visits to recovery wards at military hospitals. He explained that the humor of these soldiers “is dark as you might expect and that kind of black, mesh-like humor is traditionally been kind of the thin membrane between these guys and insanity. They have to look at horrible things and somehow detoxify them, and often they’ll do that with humor” (Norris).

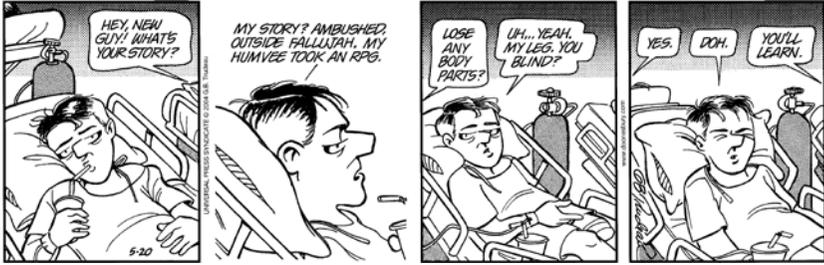


Figure 10: "You Blind?" DOONESBURY © (2004) G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.

Critics praised the complexity and compassion of these recovery episodes, and many readers found them to be cathartic. Illustrating, perhaps, the power of comic strips to invite complex sympathy and identification, Trudeau reported that he was “overwhelmed by some of the letters that came in about B.D. It was so emotional. People wrote that it made them feel they had a personal stake in the war—like someone they knew had been harmed” (Bates 62). Given many peoples’ perception of Trudeau as a social critic with partisan leanings, it is not surprising that some readers and critics were less impressed. One retired soldier complained that “People are getting wounded over there and perhaps losing legs, but what purpose does it serve on the comics page? There’s no ha-ha in that at all. Unfortunately, it all comes back to whatever Trudeau’s political agenda is” (Montgomery). The *Fox News* Channel talk show host, Bill O’Reilly echoed those sentiments, calling Trudeau a “committed leftist,” and charging that “a case can be made that Trudeau is attempting to sap the morale of Americans vis-a-vis Iraq by using a long-running, somewhat beloved cartoon character to create pathos” (Weingarten).

While there is room to criticize Trudeau for his sometimes awkward mix of satire and investigative journalism, the core flaw of the critiques of the B.D. series is that those readers failed to see that while episodes may have been inherently anti-war in their depiction of any combat’s terrible cost, they transcended partisan satire in their detailed engagement with a particular soldier’s struggles. Trudeau, for example, could have persisted in using B.D. as a symbol of knee-jerk conservatism or to satirize the red state support the Bush administration received in initiating and justifying the Iraq war. Political references disappeared in these runs, however, thus allowing the strip to focus fully on the quotidian challenges of a recovering soldier. Trudeau explained that the “The wounded warrior stories are probably more closely observed and naturalistic than the nonmilitary stories.” He continued, saying that

Stories are what connects us to our countrymen... and it is important for (soldiers) to know that the stories aren't being told in their expense, but in their honor. (Sanders)

The last thing I want to do is contribute to the suffering I'm trying to describe, so the storytelling is a little more nuanced. But I still have the same obligation to entertain, to tease out the absurdities. Readers don't mind dark material as long as you make it bearable. (Cavna)

Because Trudeau's recent B.D. episodes break with comic strip conventions on so many fronts—in transcending the reductive comedy and satire of the medium, in achieving a naturalistic tone, and in featuring such emotionally engaging character development—one has to look for comparisons to other texts beyond the comics page. In particular, novelistic treatments of the everyday absurdities of war and the particular costs soldiers pay, bear some enlightening similarities to Trudeau's work. Jules Feiffer, another cartoonist whose work defies easy categorization points in this direction, observing that Trudeau's work amounts to “a kind of Dickensian novel.” He continues, saying, “I think Garry got himself into this situation and took on a reality that outstripped the satire... His people became increasingly real. The humor and satire are still there, but it now has a depth and a resonance—which comes from years of building [an internal] reality—that satire seldom achieves. It's in a class by itself” (Cavna).

Trudeau's reaction to this praise, nevertheless, is that his storytelling aspirations are more pragmatic and modest; he says

I don't think novelistically. I don't think anybody in my position could,” he says. “You really are a short-order cook. You're taking a measure of the day and the kinds of things that are in the passing parade of that moment—just trying to find a target with your little peashooter and hoping for the best. That it has ended up as something that represents a rolling tapestry of modern life in my country surprises no one more than me.” (Wagner)

The continuity built into *Doonesbury* is critical in allowing Trudeau to build this sprawling comic novel in daily installments, one vignette and wry set of jokes at a time. The continual string of ironic jests, in fact, framed within a military hospital, and grounded in the black humor of real loss and tragedy, reminds one

of Yossarian in *Catch-22*, sitting in a hospital bed, trying to make sense of his plight within a military bureaucracy and in relation to the suffering soldiers that surround him. Heller, too, like Trudeau, was charged with inappropriately pairing the traumas of combat with a comic discourse or medium. Heller's work can be defended, of course, by pointing out that the silly joking amounted to a type of deconstructive wordplay that challenged jingoistic propaganda and the controlling and dehumanizing rhetoric of some military bureaucracies. Yossarian's absurdist and sometimes "crazy" humor, in other words, becomes his most effective weapon in dealing with the inherent absurdities and insanities of a brand of corporatized and dehumanizing war culture.

One can also compare Trudeau's work to that of more recent novelistic treatments of the Viet Nam conflict—the writings of Michael Herr and Tim O'Brien, in particular. In postmodern fashion, these writers tamped down their authorial voice in order to channel more effectively the raw experiences and perspectives of the soldiers they encountered at ground level. Their work, as a result, achieved a multi-vocal, organic complexity, reflecting accurately the humor, profanity, and pragmatic philosophies of the everyday Willie's and Joe's of that era.

Michael Herr's construction of his episodic treatment of the Viet Nam experience, in particular, bears some resemblance to Trudeau's experience. Herr was originally commissioned by *Esquire* magazine to send back canned reports of what he observed at ground level in Viet Nam. The chaos and trauma that Herr witnessed, however, convinced him that the true experience of combat could not be packaged so tidily; if he were to be true to the everyday soldiers with whom he fraternized, he would have to record his impressions in a more organic and self-effacing way, allowing the soldiers to speak through his prose. As a result, his writing acts as a conduit, communicating the rhythm, slang, and trauma of combat.

Trudeau, similarly, found that his direct engagement with soldiers struggling to overcome both physical and mental injuries pushed him to create comic strips that achieved a high level of poignant realism in detail and tone. Like Herr, Trudeau also answered to that postmodern impulse to efface his authorial voice altogether and channel with even greater authenticity and empathy the experiences and thoughts of real soldiers. This ultimately resulted in him moving beyond the contained world of comic strip comedy altogether. Feeling that the soldiers' stories needed to be heard simply in their unfiltered energy and rawness, he created a blog that featured dispatches from the lives of everyday soldiers. Potential contributors were greeted by Ray Hightower within *Doonesbury* itself, and then Trudeau joked with the readers of the blog, saying that "We came up with the idea that the Global War on

Terror needed its own literary magazine.” Your posts will be a part of “GWOT-lit’s forward position.” Soldiers responded enthusiastically, contributing thousands of posts marked by a bracing honesty and black humor. Ultimately some of the most compelling entries were collected into a book, *The Sandbox: Dispatches from the Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan*, that was promoted under the *Doonesbury* umbrella, but contained little of Trudeau’s art and comedy. In an introduction, Trudeau says these stories are being published before they get “over-thought” and that they vary “from boredom, to hardship, to hilarity, to violence, back to boredom, into tension, and occasionally it trips across wonderment along the way...” (Weingarten).

This unconventional move—the effacement of one’s authorial voice so thoroughly—was perhaps not too surprising, coming from a cartoonist who had defied genre and medium boundaries so consistently throughout his career. Trudeau, after all, was a pioneer in melding editorial cartooning with comic strips, insisting that the funnies page was a viable medium for topical satire, gritty real-life experiences, and existentially dark themes. And he was flexible enough in his story-telling and character construction over the years to make the necessary changes to give his satire authenticity and nuance. This included adjustments in aesthetic representation—the use of iconic symbols that distilled the foibles of political leaders, for example, or the removal of a key character’s helmet to signal a rhetorical shift into regions of comic naturalism and empathy. It also included narrative adjustments as well—the splintering of his comedic and satiric treatment of warfare into different streams, for example, lampooning broad diplomatic shenanigans in some strips, behind the scenes machinations in others, and the noble, often apolitical sacrifices of real soldiers in a third.

While the *Sandbox* dispatches may seem like a fourth branch that takes Trudeau completely beyond the realm of artistic interpretation, it can ultimately be seen as a supplement rather than replacement to his comic strip work. The soldiers were emboldened to write on this blog after seeing their experiences interpreted through Trudeau’s comic, after all, and the blog and book itself could not have reached a broad audience if it were not for Trudeau’s fame and publishing clout. The sum of all of this work, then, is a flexible set of visual and narrative mediums, channeled through, and made viable by, a single satiric auteur, but ultimately reflective of, and doing justice to, a great many individual soldiers’ darkly humorous worldviews and extreme sacrifices. And while the move toward naturalistic, unfiltered reflections of individual experiences, divorced from partisan squabbling, may seem like an abandonment of taking a stance against a particular war—or war in general, for that matter—it is, nevertheless a highly effective protest against the insanities of

organized violence. What better way to convince a reader of the immense costs of combat than through the particularized experiences of one soldier—real or fictional—who stands to lose more than just a limb in serving his country.

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